

WIND ENERGY CONSTRUCTION BLOWS IN BIG NUMBERS OF WORKERS TO REGION

By Karl Puckett

With demand for renewable energy rising in the West, wind developers plan to export more electricity generated in northcentral Montana in 2009 and local and state economic development officials contend spin-off benefits will result for Montanans.

"You just can't build houses fast enough for when these projects come along," said Lorette Carter, economic development director for the city of Shelby, which is located in Toole County.

The first phase of the 210-megawatt Glacier Wind Farm in Glacier and Toole counties was completed in 2008.

A second phase, which will add 71 turbines and 103.5 megawatts, is scheduled to begin this spring, said Calvin Olson, NaturEner's director of wind energy development.

Last summer, 375 wind farm construction workers flooded the area for the first phase, finding rental homes in Shelby, Sunburst, Valier, Conrad and Cut Bank, Carter said.

Many workers brought their own trailers to town and parked outside a city building.

Shelby was awarded a development grant and is working with NeighborWorks in Great Falls to build four manufactured homes by summer when construction crews return to finish the Glacier Wind Farm project, Carter said. The hope is to have 10 new homes total to meet the demand.

Toole County Development Director Deb Brandon said that, thanks to the start of construction of the Glacier Wind Farm, the county's unemployment has held steady at 3.2 percent, far lower than the national and even state average.

Eventually, the wind farm will hire between 25 and 40 full-time employees, she said.

The company began advertising in mid-January for 10 jobs maintaining the turbines. The expansion will add about 50 percent more generation capacity.

Shelby's Carter expects construction of the Montana Alberta Tie Line, a transmission line that would connect the electrical grids of the United States and of Alberta at Great Falls and Lethbridge, to contribute to housing demand as well.

Developer Tonbridge Power hopes to begin construction in March and three wind-farm developers, including NaturEner, have purchased capacity on the line. Landowners are appealing the current route.

"Wind is going to become a big thing in Pondera County," predicted Conrad Economic Development Director Harold Olson.

Three wind companies are testing wind velocity in different locations throughout the county, he said.

Owners of three wind farms — NaturEner, Invenergy (Judith Gap) and Montana Dakota Utilities (Diamond Willow) — have announced 166.5 megawatts worth of expansions this year, said Chantel McCormick of the Montana Department of Commerce's Energy Infrastructure Promotion and Development office.

Horizon Energy hopes to break ground on a new 50-megawatt to 60-megawatt wind near Martinsdale this year as well.

"That's just sort of the tip of what we're going to see," McCormick said.

Last year, a total of 126 megawatts of new wind power went on-line in Montana, boosting the total wind output to 271 megawatts, enough to power about 37,800 homes, she said.

The country's credit crunch could slow new wind projects from getting off the ground in 2009 but it isn't leading to cancellations of projects in which the planning process is well under way, McCormick said.

Paul Cartwright, an energy analyst with the state Department of Environmental Quality, said wind development is ramping up because demand for renewable power is increasing as states in the West pass laws requiring the use of more green energy.

"Regulated utilities need to get certain percentage from renewable sources," he said.